

November Newsletter Extended Article

How can principals improve assessment literacy in their schools?

by Alison Wright

If we are in the business of teaching and learning, we also are in the business of assessing. As Frederickson and Collins (1989) wrote, “The goal of assessments has to be, above all, to support teaching and learning.” With the myriad of assessments available, making good choices is more important than ever. If administrators take the time to help their school community achieve assessment literacy, then students benefit. Here are some tips to help school leaders do just that.

Inform parents about how assessments are used in classrooms to measure student learning on a daily basis. I attended a conference about a year ago in which a legislator remarked that without yearly state testing, some parents don’t know whether their students are performing at grade level. This was shocking to me as an educator, knowing first-hand that a yearly state test is only one snapshot among many, many different types of assessments. Parents need to know what formative assessments are and how teachers use them to intentionally plan instruction.

Ask teachers important questions. Yesterday I met with a teacher who was about to give her students a summative assessment. I asked her two questions:

- 1) What did you want your students to be able to do at the end of this unit?
- 2) Will this assessment tell you whether or not your students can do that?

After thinking about it, she said that some of the questions on the assessment really weren’t going to tell her much about student learning but that the test was “something we’ve always done.” Teachers know their students and their content, and they need to hear from their administrators that they are trusted as experts to make sound decisions, both for teaching *and* assessing. If they know that a particular assessment isn’t serving its purpose, encourage them to try something else. If we want teachers to push student thinking, administrators need to model that in conversations with teachers.

Provide time for teachers to create their own benchmarks. When teachers have opportunities to work collaboratively, they flourish. The very best assessments are the results of conversations that teachers have with each other, whether in a formal Professional Learning Community setting or in the copy room during lunch. Assessments that are created using the expertise that exists in Kentucky schools are often more effective than textbook-created materials.

Provide professional learning for teachers about the different types of assessments. I know many teachers who are eager to try assessments that push student thinking beyond paper-and-pencil tests but simply don’t have a context for what it might look like. Teachers are so pressed for time that they often feel uncomfortable trying something without seeing it work first-hand, in their community and in their content area. School leaders might encourage teacher leaders to facilitate a faculty-wide book study using CASL Chapter 4: Assess How? Designing Assessments to Do What You Want. Teachers within PLC’s could then examine the four types of assessment (selected response, extended written response, performance and personal

communication) and use the Target-Method Match activity to try a different type of assessment. Then, teachers could work as a PLC to plan, implement, analyze student work, and finally reflect on the effectiveness of that particular assessment.

Involve students in conversations about assessments. Gentry Fitch, a senior at West Jessamine High School, had this to say about assessments. “So, what’s the best way to make sure our learning and teaching works? Use assessments that include formative tests for learning, assessments that include portfolios for showing and assessments that include real-world field tasks for proving.” He, like many other students, urge school leaders to think beyond multiple choice whenever possible and afford students opportunities to demonstrate achievement in multiple ways.